

# Human Sacrifices: Can They Be Justified?

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## 1 Introduction

In some of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* we find episodes of human sacrifice that are narrated as exceptional happenings due to the fact that they do not comply with Greek and Roman religious rules. The cases narrated in the *Lives of Pelopidas, Agesilaus, Themistocles, and Marcellus* take place in exceptional circumstances, what I call 'extreme necessity' (ἐσχάτη ἀνάγκη), and have similar objectives: to achieve military victory and save the country.<sup>1</sup> It appears to be useful to analyze their differences and similarities as well as Plutarch's motives for inserting them in the corresponding biographies.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 The Life of Pelopidas

The episode of sacrifice recounted in the *Life of Pelopidas* (20.4–22) is the most complex. Not only are there several human sacrifices mentioned in this tale, but there is a debate between those in favor and those against sacrifice. Plutarch uses this debate as a rhetorical tool in order to introduce his own ideas regarding both human sacrifices and the gods.

The episode has two parts. The first (in chapter 20) is a legend that tells of a tomb in the plain of Leuctra. Those entombed are Scedasus' daughters, who died after being raped by some Spartans. Since their father never obtained justice in Lacedaemonia, "he slaughtered himself over his daughters' tomb" (ἔσφαξεν ἑαυτὸν ἐπὶ τοῖς τάφοις τῶν παρθένων). Therefore, the legend narrates the father's voluntary ritual self-sacrifice in honor of his dead daughters to offset the justice he did not receive.<sup>3</sup> This detail is not usually mentioned; how-

1 The passages of Plu., *Phil.* 21.9 and *Publ.* 4.1 are of a different character and, consequently, do not fall under the scope of this paper.

2 I also attempted to take into account the method proposed by J.N. Bremmer, "Human Sacrifice: a Brief Introduction," in J.N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007) 2: "The ideal analysis should always pay attention to the question of who sacrifices, where, when, why and with what kind of rhetoric."

3 On this kind of sacrifices and its offset function (although of different types, because this vol-

ever, the employed verb, ἔσφαξεν, indicates that the narrator considered the action as a ritual sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>

The second part details the story of Pelopidas' dream and its consequences (chapters 21–22). Before the battle of Leuctra, Pelopidas dreamed of Scedasus and his daughters, who ordered him “to sacrifice a blond virgin<sup>5</sup> in honor of the girls” (ταῖς κόραις σφαγιάσαι παρθένον ξανθήν) if he wanted to conquer the enemy.<sup>6</sup> The order seemed to Pelopidas “terrible and against the norms” (δεινοῦ δὲ καὶ παρὰ νόμου τοῦ προστάγματος). He told the seers along with the chiefs of the army everything he had dreamed; their opinions were divided: two in favor and two against the sacrifice.

Those in favor of the sacrifice put forward as an argument a list of human sacrifices (*Pelopidas* 21.3–4). All of these sacrifices had been carried out in exceptional circumstances, which justify the breach of the norms.<sup>7</sup> The selected examples are suitable to the argument. In each case there is a distinction between the mythical (‘the ancient’, τῶν παλαιῶν) and the historical (‘the later ones’, τῶν δ’ ὕστερον),<sup>8</sup> but they all have two core components in common:

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untary sacrifice was not accomplished to avoid damage to the community but due to personal interests), cf. H.S. Versnel, “Self-Sacrifice, Compensation, Anonymous Gods,” in O. Reverdin & B. Grange (eds.), *Le sacrifice dans l'Antiquité* (Vandoeuvres/Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1981) 148–160. As a rite to appease the dead, cf. A. Henrichs, “Human Sacrifice in Greek Religion: Three Case Studies,” in *ibid.*, 233.

- 4 About words specifically employed to refer to sacrifices, see J.N. Bremmer, “Myth and Ritual in Greek Human Sacrifice: Lykaon, Polyxena and the Case of the Rhodian Criminal,” in Bremmer (ed.), *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, 60–61. Idem, “Human Sacrifice in Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris*: Greek and Barbarian,” in P. Bonnechere & R. Gagné (eds.), *Sacrifices humains. Perspectives croisées et représentations* (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2013) 88.
- 5 About the virginity of the victims as a feature of perfection and the sacrifice of a young virgin in honor of a dead person, cf. P. Bonnechere, “Victime humaine et absolue perfection dans la mentalité grecque,” in Bonnechere & Gagné (eds.), *Sacrifices humains*, 39–44.
- 6 Other mentions of the legend of the Leuctridae and their burial in relation to the battle of Leuctra do not talk about the dream of Pelopidas: X., *HG* 6.4.7, Paus. 9.13.5–6, Diod. 15.54.1–3. In Plu., *Am. narr.* 774D, it is said that Scedasus appears in Pelopidas’ dream to ask him to sacrifice a white colt.
- 7 Cf. P. Bonnechere, “Le sacrifice humain grec entre norme et anormalité,” in P. Brulé (ed.), *La norme en matière religieuse en Grèce ancienne. Actes du xii<sup>e</sup> colloque du CIERGA, Rennes, septembre 2007* (Kernos Sup. 21; Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2009) 196–199.
- 8 The mentioned myths are those of Menoeceus (cf. E., *Ph.* 910–1012. Paus. 9.25.1) and Macaria (cf. E., *Heracl.* 474–607), who offered themselves up willingly to be sacrificed in order to save their respective fatherland. On these myths, see D.D. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece* (London/New York: Routledge, 1991) 73–76. As examples of historical human sacrifices are cited those of the wise Pherecydes and of Leonidas. The skin of Pherecydes was guarded by the kings of Sparta, maybe as a talisman, due to an oracle (κατά τι λόγιον). It is pos-